

# THE *FOREST* IN THE CITY



TWO YEARS OF FOREST DEFENSE IN ATLANTA

# THE FOREST IN THE CITY

*“If you don’t read anything else related to the  
#stopcopcity cause, read this!!!”*  
—Twitter user @Dejabooharr

*“One of the most useful tools for other movements to come  
out of the fight to Stop Cop City...Thank you so so  
much to the people who wrote this.”*  
—Micah Herskind  
(Writer)

*“The Defend the Atlanta forest movement reveals again the  
intersection between policing and ecocidal climate crisis.”*  
—Alexander Dunlap  
(University of Oslo)

This text was originally published on 02.22.2023.

Find it online with links and citations at [crimethinc.com/ForestintheCity](https://crimethinc.com/ForestintheCity)

This text follows “The City in the Forest” published on 04.11.2022.

Find it online at [crimethinc.com/CityintheForest](https://crimethinc.com/CityintheForest)

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE STAKES OF THE FIGHT

Our society is at a crisis point. Decades of escalating economic pressure have created rampant inequality and desperation. Rather than addressing the root causes of these, politicians across the political spectrum continue channeling more and more money to police, relying on them to suppress unrest by force alone. This dependence has enabled police departments and their allies to consume a vast amount of public resources. Meanwhile, driven by the same economic pressures, catastrophic climate change is generating hurricanes, forest fires, droughts, and widespread ecological collapse.

In this context, starting in April 2021, a bold movement set out to defend a forest in Atlanta, Georgia, where local politicians and corporate profiteers want to build a police training compound and a soundstage for the film industry. The training compound, known as Cop City, would be the largest police training facility in the United States. It would devastate the South River Forest, also known as Weelaunee Forest in honor of the Muscogee Creek people who lived there until they were deported in the Trail of Tears.

The movement to defend the Weelaunee Forest has drawn together a wide range of groups and strategies. Legal defense organizations like the South River Forest Coalition, which is bringing a lawsuit against the DeKalb County government, work parallel to groups like the SRY Campaign, an anonymous collective of researchers who publicize the home and office addresses of those who seek to destroy the forest. While abolitionists and radical environmentalists have established encampments and tree houses in the forest, a network of pre-schools and parents has built community gardens and hosted public outreach events. Still others have organized raves and cultural events in the forest, connecting the most ambitious artists with the irrepressible spirit

of the movement.

Among those who wish to see Cop City built are the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), mayor Andre Dickens, and the various corporations that stand to profit on the development. At the same time, thanks to a back-room deal with the city government, real estate mogul and film industry executive Ryan Millsap is preparing to destroy a public park on an adjacent land parcel within the same forest.

Behind the scenes, Cop City has the support of the Atlanta Committee for Progress, a business association involving the region's most powerful industrial and bureaucratic cliques. Alex Taylor, the former chairman, is also the acting president of Cox Enterprises, which owns various Atlanta media outlets and is among the leading funders of the Atlanta Police Foundation. In order to create a veneer of democratic process and local support, the APF and their supporters have contrived the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC), comprised of members of the Police Foundation and a few residents of Southwest Dekalb. When one of the initial members of CSAC spoke out against the project, she was removed from her position.

These are the forces that are facing off over the forest. On one side, some of the wealthiest and most institutionally powerful figures in the state of Georgia. On the other, a network of local activists and their friends.

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During the George Floyd rebellion of 2020, for the first time, it became possible to speak of police abolition as a viable proposal about how to break the cycle of violence that poverty and police militarization impose on our communities. Yet every effort to “defund the police” via institutional means reached a dead end. Under Joe Biden, the Democratic Party has doubled down on unconditional support for police. If there is any hope of limiting the continuous expansion of police infrastructure and state violence, grassroots movements and direct action will have to show the way.

The same goes double for climate change. At this point, practically everyone agrees that humanity is on a collision course with ecological

disaster, but institutional efforts to address the situation have accomplished precious little. The movement to defend the forest in Atlanta offers a glimpse of what it would take to defend our communities from the unbridled profiteering and repression that are forcing this catastrophe on all of us.

The Atlanta forest has become a flashpoint in both of these fights. With stakes this high, it is easy to see why people on both sides are dedicating so much energy to this conflict.

After two years of simmering conflict, the situation is escalating. Starting in December, the police began bringing terrorism charges against almost every activist they arrest, citing being in the forest and posting on social media as sufficient grounds. On January 18, Georgia State Patrol Officers killed Manuel Terán, known in the forest as Tortuguita. Tortuguita had been living under siege for almost a year as a beloved part of the small community dwelling in the encampments.

While the authorities seek to crush the movement by any means, solidarity efforts are springing up across the world. Forest defenders in Atlanta are planning another Week of Action from March 4 to 11, inviting everyone to join them.





## TAKING THE INITIATIVE

At the end of January 2022, as described in *The City in the Forest*, it seemed almost impossible to slow the pace of the preparations for construction that Reeves+Young and their subcontractor Long Engineering were carrying out. Neither small group actions nor larger protests had succeeded in delaying the soil boring and sampling at the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. The segments of the movement that had previously sought to sway City Council were in disarray, while activists oriented towards direct action were still seeking the leverage they needed.

On March 1, 2022, an anonymous group poured bleach into the engines of five vehicles belonging to Long Engineering. According to an online statement, this action was intended to impose consequences for their participation in “pre-construction” efforts in the forest. On March 19, six machines owned by Reeves+Young, including two excavators, were reportedly destroyed by saboteurs in the Flowery Branch suburb. On April 9, a website appeared listing the names and home addresses of executives in Reeves+Young. This came just a few days after independent researchers discovered that Brasfield & Gorrie had been contracted to build Cop City. It is rare for more than one general contractor to oversee projects like this. What was happening behind closed doors was confusing; the only thing that was clear was that the forest destroyers were moving forward and nothing was stopping them.

And then, unexpectedly and without explanation, Reeves+Young dropped the contract. Seeking to control the narrative, the Police Foundation claimed that the work Reeves+Young had been contracted for was complete and they were no longer on the project. At the time, however, Reeves+Young had hardly done any work. They had sent a representative to escort a subcontractor into the forest a few times, but the surveyor flags and stakes that they had placed had been removed overnight.



They probably did not withdraw as a consequence of the accumulation of actions, nor as the result of any particular action. More likely, it was the feeling that things could go in any direction, that the future of the project could not be predicted, nor the costs reliably calculated.

The entire movement interpreted this as a win. With this small victory, a new period of resistance opened up.

## THE SPRING WAS OURS

A frenzy of activity followed. Mass meetings, canvassing efforts, media interviews, and sabotage all increased in frequency and focus. Many movements and organizers rely on repression or fear to mobilize supporters; activists defending the forest in Atlanta have sought to maintain a positive and proactive attitude throughout, highlighting confidence and goals even in the face of setbacks, aiming to foster ambitious, solution-oriented mentalities and proposals.

At the end of April, police began scoping out the forest, making half-hearted incursions into the Old Atlanta Prison Farm North Gate on a few occasions. Sometimes these went unnoticed or ignored; occasionally, activists repelled them with stones. Nobody was sure how the situation would develop for those camping in the forest.

Organizers announced a third Week of Action for the second week of May 2022. It seemed likely to bring many more people into the movement than the previous weeks of action. In the lead-up, local organizers began to promote a summit with the Muscogee (Creek) communities in Oklahoma. Building on the Stomp Dance ceremony of November 2021, this was a chance to hear from elders, historians, and activists. A local radio station came to broadcast the presentations live on the air. Several preschools attended the summit along with students, faculty, and parents.

Tying together different narratives, ways of understanding, and forms of knowledge has been a strength of the movement from the beginning. Rather than combining efforts in the name of efficiency, different groups perform the same tasks, reproducing similar infrastructures, efforts, and events. Sometimes, this is intentional, sometimes not. This has created resiliency in the movement, ensuring that power is distributed

across many people and projects rather than aggregating in a few hands. When one group burns out, faces repression, loses steam, or slows down, other sections of the movement pick up the slack. The different attitudes, aesthetics, and styles of organizing that comprise this movement are incommensurable, sometimes even mutually unintelligible, but this has made the movement stronger, like the proverbial many-headed hydra.

### THIRD WEEK OF ACTION (MAY 2022)

The third Week of Action marked the threshold between one phase and another—no less than when the Atlanta City Council had passed the Cop City ordinance at an earlier decisive moment in fall 2021.

Starting on May 8, 2022, hundreds of people poured into the forest: anarchists, environmentalists, abolitionists, and other direct action-oriented groups bringing tents, hammocks, sleeping bags, and food. Some arrived prepared to operate a field kitchen. Small encampments emerged everywhere, some adopting names for themselves. Clusters of tents and canopies appeared in a patchwork on both sides of the South River—some organized by affinity group, others by chance. It is difficult to take a head count in the forest, as the opponents of the movement have probably also noticed. The kitchen crews estimated that a minimum of 200 people were sleeping in the forest at night; on some days, considerably more people joined the occupation.

The forest remained family-friendly; kids were present in the forest every day of the week, receiving guided tours, making art, or directing their own time under the care of community members. But this was not your standard protest encampment. Many of the participants wore balaclavas. They arrived prepared to take direct action against the Police Foundation and its affiliates, aiming to shift the balance of power.

On the first day of the Week of Action, May 9, forest defenders awoke to the sound of falling trees. At the behest of Ryan Millsap, a small construction crew and a group of Dekalb County Sheriffs working as private security were making their way into the tree line from the Radio Control (“RC”) club on the southeast side of Intrenchment Creek Park. A number of determined people responded immediately,

repelling the bulldozers with a few stones before linking arms and chanting “move back” in unison at the police officers further afield. One courageous person approached an officer and explained to him that the construction crew was engaging in illegal activity. Later, Dekalb County issued a “Stop Work” order, ostensibly following a flurry of calls by lawyers and neighborhood groups tipping them off about the illegal work.

In the following days, amid assemblies, workshops, shared meals, mushroom walks, and informal socializing, those gathered for the week of action endeavored to make the Weelaunee Forest into a cop-free zone. Whenever officers approached the area, venturing into the parking lot or parking their vehicles nearby, activists confronted them. In some instances, several dozen people descended from multiple sides of the forest, rushing police vehicles, slashing tires, smashing windows, throwing rocks.

No one was arrested or injured in these confrontations. They did not disproportionately shape the atmosphere in the forest, either. There was plenty of space in which anyone with objections to or concerns about this kind of action could be confident that they would not be caught in a confrontation. The third Week of Action created a space in which people of many different temperaments and strategies could coexist.

## **HELL IS EMPTY, ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE**

At the same time, actions targeting the bureaucrats and executives overseeing the destruction of the forest began in earnest. These actions highlighted the forces responsible for Cop City. They are driven by abstractions, victims of a competitive system pitting humanity against all living things. But they are also human beings.

On May 9, several dozen people marched to the suburban home of Shepherd Long, the CEO of Long Engineering, a subsidiary of Atlas Technical Consultants and a subcontractor of Brasfield & Gorrie. This was the first of several such actions during the Third Week of Action.

On May 11, a small crowd gathered outside the suburban home of Keith Johnson, regional President of Brasfield & Gorrie. Protesters scaled the fence and banged on drums early in the morning, chanting

“Drop the contract!” Johnson is invested with the authority to make decisions for Brasfield & Gorrie—and he is compensated handsomely for this responsibility, judging by the size and location of his multi-house estate.

Brasfield & Gorrie is one of the largest construction general contractors in the Southeast. They are based out of Birmingham, Alabama, but they have offices throughout the Southeast, including one in the northwest periphery of Atlanta, next to the Atlanta Braves stadium, in a district known as “The Battery.” This part of the city, a pseudo-neighborhood recently invented by developers, offers a farcical imitation of urban life. Fast food restaurants, luxury condominiums, corporate hotels, and gas stations fill the area, punctuated by parking lots and storage units. There had never been a protest there, not even in 2020 during the George Floyd rebellion.

On May 12, around 80 people in hoodies and camouflage descended on the Brasfield & Gorrie regional office in The Battery. Demonstrators chanted “Stop Cop City” while some in the crowd painted graffiti and shot fireworks at the façade of the building. After breaching the lawn of the facility, a few determined people began throwing paint balloons and stones at the building, cracking the plate glass windows. Others continued lobbing fireworks. After several minutes, the crowd dispersed into the surrounding streets.

Within a few minutes, police cars encircled the area, pulling over cars and snatching pedestrians off the street. Some people were detained in nearby strip malls and gas stations. In the hours that followed, Cobb County police harassed and intimidated anyone wearing black or “alternative” clothing. By the end of the day, police had arrested five people they claim participated in the action against Brasfield & Gorrie. All were charged with felonies including “Rioting” and “Criminal Damage to Property.” At the time, this was the most serious repression the movement had faced. News coverage of the demonstration spread within left-wing “infospheres” and algorithmically constructed “echo chambers.” In the press release that followed, Brasfield & Gorrie confirmed for the first time what activists had already known: they were participating in the construction of Cop City.

The following morning, in the very early hours, several people in

white coveralls vandalized the Brasfield & Gorrie corporate headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama. Video released by the company showed the group painting slogans, throwing rocks, and using blunt objects to smash glass doors and windows. News of this action reached the encampment in Atlanta many hours later, when an online claim of responsibility was read aloud to a large crowd around a campfire—offsetting the demoralization some may have felt after the arrests at the Atlanta office.

## THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND WHO WE ARE

The situation developing in the forest was uncontrollable—and the government knew it. In light of the vandalism, news coverage and internet commentary opposed to the movement began to conjure an image of militancy out of a Hollywood movie. According to this false narrative, the movement was comprised of hardline extremists from other parts of the country. Looking at a beautiful, rambunctious cultural zone teeming with creativity and mutual support, the government described only terror and chaos. In painting this picture, opponents of the movement hoped to prepare the public to support a crackdown.

Rather than reinforcing this caricature of militancy and thus contributing indirectly to the repressive strategy of the local government, the events of May 14—the final day of the third Week of Action—directly contradicted it. This was no ruse: this is in fact a popular movement with widespread cultural and civic support, and the end of the Week of Action was a good time to showcase that.

In the early afternoon, over 100 residents marched in East Atlanta Village, chiefly pre-school children with their parents and teachers. Many children took the megaphone to express themselves. They comprehended the political stakes of the struggle more clearly than its critics: they did not want the forest to be destroyed because they were worried about their futures; they did not want the police to be given control over a large portion of the city because they didn't want to see more violence-producing infrastructure. There were many photographs of this march, but local media outlets did not circulate them, and likely none appear in the Bureau of Investigations slide-show presentations

about the movement. Similarly, some segments of the movement have inadvertently participated in the censorship of the schoolchildren by focusing only on militant actions or the progress of the lawsuits, to the detriment of a coherent analysis of the movement as a whole.

A few hours after this march, around 4 pm, another group of over 200 people met in Freedom Park near Little 5 Points. With many participants holding small branches and plants, reminiscent of the soldiers at the conclusion of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, they set off behind banners and drums into the surrounding neighborhoods. Aside from blocking traffic and setting off a few fireworks, those gathered seemed more interested in communicating with the public than engaging in direct action or clashing with police. The atmosphere was jubilant, and countless motorists and local residents stopped to applaud. After an hour, the crowd began dispersing in Inman Park, off Euclid Avenue. Helicopters were circling overhead. Police cruisers were racing up and down all of the surrounding streets. Were the police foolhardy enough to fall into the trap?

After the protest dispersed, frustrated cops sprinted from their vehicles, pouring into the park and shopping district from every side. This was not the fire-breathing mob they had convinced themselves would be laying siege to the area. Still, they were not able to alter their plans. The cultural composition of the protesters matched the bohemian aesthetics of the majority of the pedestrians, residents, and shoppers in the area, rendering it impossible to distinguish between supporters of the movement and people leaving the second-hand clothing shops or health food stores on nearby streets. News cameras filmed neighbors screaming at officers from their lawns. Multiple people were tackled and beaten by officers for their alleged participation in the protest. One journalist was tazed. In the end, 17 people were arrested and charged with "pedestrian in a roadway."

From one perspective, the protest was a disaster. The crowd was not ready to engage the police in a physical confrontation. On the other hand, it altered the media narrative and the public perception of the movement in favor of the protesters. It is rare to see such a shift shortly after masked activists smash windows and vandalize a corporate headquarters. Instead of a mad clique of violent extremists, the movement

could be seen for what it really was: a popular struggle facing reckless hostility from local authorities. The real art of subversion cannot be reduced to illegal activity or physical resistance. Rather, it is a question of turning systems of control upside down, cultivating a situation in which self-directed activity can flourish contagiously.

Within a few days, all the charges against the 17 arrestees had been dropped. The accused now stand to take home thousands of dollars apiece in restitution for their wrongful arrests. This protest was not planned to produce that outcome, but if it had been, it would have been astute.

### **THEY TRIED TO BREAK US: POST-WEEK RAID**

After the third Week of Action, many expected police to seek revenge. The easiest way to respond would be to attack the encampments in the forest. Although the media coverage that Atlanta police had received for their excesses in Little 5 Points had shifted public attitudes, it probably did not substantially alter the eagerness of law enforcement agencies to use force. Since today's media landscape tends to show consumers only what they already believe, it is likely that law enforcement and their allies only saw coverage confirming their own perspectives.

On May 17, the frustration and bitterness of the police, which had accumulated for a week, was unleashed on those living in the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. In the early morning, dozens of police vehicles, helicopters, and drones encircled the forest. Atlanta Police Department, Dekalb County Sheriffs, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Natural Resources, the Atlanta Bomb Squad, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and possibly other agencies mobilized their forces and prepared to raid.

Police entered the forest around 10 am from Key Road. Most officers were wearing helmets or other forms of protective gear; some sported camouflage and masks. The agents and officers involved in the operation immediately set about destroying food, shelters, and protest infrastructure. One officer used a sledgehammer to smash a generator. Others worked with arborists to destroy unused tree houses or sat beneath the occupied tree sits threatening to do violence to the activists

above them.

Meanwhile, other activists engaged in proportional responses to the police operation. An abandoned truck caught fire, as did barricades made of wood and unused tires. Small groups and individuals engaged in hit-and-run actions. While the police employed state-of-the-art equipment, armor, and weaponry, forest defenders used rudimentary structures, ragged hoodies, sticks, stones, and fireworks. On more than one occasion, forest defenders used Molotov cocktails to prevent further police incursions, presumably seeking to prevent the invaders from doing serious harm to the defenseless activists who were occupying the trees. Those devices were only used in clearings where the results could be easily predicted. Pro-police advocates spent many months making a fuss about a few improvised bottles of flammable liquid. Surely, the police would not prefer to face the flash balls, tear gas, pepper spray, heat-seeking helicopters, and K9 units that they have routinely used against forest defenders.

After several hours, police began to withdraw from the area. On the other side of the forest, Dekalb County police officers entered Intrenchment Creek Park and arrested the first eight people they encountered, charging them all with “Tresspassing” in a park in broad daylight. These parkgoers may or may not have been participants in the movement, but they almost certainly were not the same people engaged in defense at the Prison Farm on the other side of the river, nearly a mile away.

Precision was not the point, however. These arrests were an essential component of the policing strategy. To this day, news reports claim “eight protesters were arrested after activists threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at police,” strongly implying that the arrestees were themselves charged with taking such actions. In fact, no one engaged in combative protest tactics was arrested in the course of the raid. In the end, despite the damage to camp infrastructure, the raid was a failure.

## **FULL-COURT PRESS**

Without the defensive actions that had taken place in the forest, including rock-throwing and other forms of direct action, it is possible that those living in tree houses or tents would have suffered significant





injuries, or that the forest itself would have fallen into the hands of the police. Other interventions took place that day, as well. While the confrontation in the forest was still ongoing, a network of activists and organizations sent out a press release announcing a press conference at 4 pm.

The police operation ended upon the arrival of movement supporters and corporate media at the edge of the forest. The speakers denounced the police operation, but they did not confine themselves to commenting on repression. In front of the news cameras, they focused the assembled crowd on the need for direct resistance, on the stakes of the struggle against climate chaos, racism, gentrification, and colonialism. Footage of the statements played on television news in the metro area, which is usually the sole domain of reactionaries and police spokespeople—who were mostly silent about the movement for several months afterwards.

This was a direct inversion of the usual media landscape. Opting for silence and obscurity did not help the police, just as it has rarely helped subversive movements in the past.

## SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES

Nowadays, it is unusual for anarchists or other aspiring revolutionaries to address the corporate media. Over the past several decades, radicals have developed many theories about the role of corporate news

organizations, the effects of mass communication on the popular imagination, and the consequences for movements that consent to be represented. Informed by these analyses, many people have developed alternative and underground media projects including websites, journals, zines, and podcasts to circumvent censorship and address audiences on a more horizontal basis. Though mass struggles have erupted year after year, those on the front lines have usually opted not to try to explain themselves to the hundreds of millions of people who learn about the world chiefly through the corporate radio, newspapers, magazines, and televisions.

The experience of revolt itself can transform the consciousness of those who participate in it, shifting their vantage point on reality. But actions are not enough when a society is as filled with false narratives as ours is. As long as the most ambitious and courageous participants in these struggles are not able to address people on their own behalf, bureaucrats, liberals, reformers, and academics have a free hand to misrepresent them. Often, this means portraying them as foot soldiers for other groups who are willing to explain the situation to mass audiences according to their own politics.

Hoping to break this pattern, the movement to defend the forest has taken on addressing corporate media as one of its core activities.

Some people know this movement as Defend the Atlanta Forest, others as Stop Cop City. Both of these slogans describe more or less the same constellation of groups, tactics, goals, and woodlands, but they speak to slightly different demographics. Understood as a whole, the movement operates a sophisticated social media infrastructure including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Mastodon, TikTok, and Telegram, as well as websites, media kits, and publicly-listed emails. These platforms ensure that the movement can communicate with those who already support it and perhaps with those immediately adjacent to them.

When journalists contact one of the movement's platforms, activists coordinate to ensure that someone within the movement can engage with them. It is usually proponents of radical social change who assume this responsibility, including abolitionists, Black autonomists, anarchists, or other aspiring revolutionaries. Rather than presenting themselves as leaders or spokespeople, activists answer journalists'

questions, give them walking tours, offer them information packets, provide them with research, and supply them with insider perspectives, leads, images, quotes, and narratives suitable for their assignments. This work is unpaid and largely invisible to media consumers.

All of the most accessible sources and platforms associated with the movement have refused to denounce direct action or radical politics. While different platforms present their own perspectives in a variety of different tones, none of them have veered so far away from the others as to offer the news outlets rifts to exploit. During interviews and press conferences, commenters from the movement speak in clear and concise sentences. Ideally, every single sentence should stand on its own as a soundbite, so that it is impossible for an editor to mutilate them. When journalists ask questions about complicated or unexpected topics, activists do not hesitate to say simply “I don’t know about that right now, but maybe we can follow up later.”

Journalists do not expect everyone to know everything, but they want other people to do as much of their jobs for them as possible. As long as participants in the movement are willing to hold their hands throughout the process, writers or photographers will often offer them sympathetic coverage. If radicals do not take on this time-consuming work, liberal organizations will take it up in pursuit of their own agendas. If the stories are not coherent or interesting or timely enough, news agencies will go with pro-police rhetoric or else invent false stories from whole cloth.

Because corporate media coverage is the primary means by which the authorities prepare popular opinion to accept the repression of protesters and poor people, it can be dangerous *not* to intervene in it. Movements should never gratuitously portray themselves as more powerful or destructive than they actually are; it is much better to be underestimated than to give your adversaries an opportunity to mobilize others against you. Likewise, they should not miss any opportunity to humanize the participants and frame the narrative themselves.

At the same time, doing so involves a host of challenges.

It can be tempting, for instance, for media spokespeople to water down their messaging so that it appeals to the broadest possible audience. However, this will not prepare audiences to understand the

tactics or priorities of the movement, nor the stakes for which they are fighting. The most important thing is not to generate favorable coverage so much as to structure the popular perception of the movement, setting the terms of debate.

If participants in combative movements are unwilling to appear in the press under their legal names or at least with their faces visible for fear of state and vigilante violence, corporate outlets will usually not work with them. The risks are real enough; indeed, even liberal leaders who denounce radical tactics may still be targeted by far-right trolls and police who associate them with a fierce movement. Fortunately, 21st century social media outlets have given grassroots activists some leverage against this form of corporate censorship by breaking down some barriers to mass communication. If editors fear that they will miss a chance to generate revenue by refusing to ease their policies regarding anonymity, they will sometimes make exceptions, even platforming balaclava-clad demonstrators if the latter can credibly present themselves as participants in powerful movements. More often than not, however, news outlets will simply move on to covering other stories.

Ambitious movements should seek to maintain a full-spectrum media interface. They should be prepared to work off the record with sympathetic journalists and documentary filmmakers, to operate round-the-clock social media strategies, to have some participants available who are willing to show their faces, others who are willing to air their voices, and more who are willing to answer written interviews. For the sake of reciprocity, anti-capitalist, abolitionist, and anarchist groups should not needlessly criticize more moderate groups.

Some might object that all of this energy is better invested in other tasks. Surely, there are more pressing issues than the way that the movement is perceived by those who are not even taking part in it. Often, it is career-oriented opportunists who end up handling media operations. This leaves front-line participants at the margins of public attention, rendering it almost inevitable that they will have to invest countless hours and sleepless nights struggling to unmask or outmaneuver self-defeating and divisive reformist perspectives. In the end, it can be more time-efficient to start out with a proper media strategy

than to play catch-up late in the game.

In the movement to defend the forest, activists in local and national press openly support direct action, encourage diverse participation, and advocate for radical social change in clear language, without hyperbole. In this case, it is the careerists who are left complaining about “imbalanced” coverage. When journalists ask leading questions, attempting to goad activists into denouncing each other, this is almost always rejected outright.

There have been exceptions. One participant stupefyingly denounced the movement as “more disappointing than Cop City itself”—surely music to the ears of the APF. Such critics often frame politics via spatial metaphors, describing coherent identities and boundaries between inside and outside. Rather than contributing freely in a field of open play, some rush to associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from specific tendencies or perceived factions, while others watch from the sidelines, passing judgment or waiting for instructions.

The urge to denounce the struggle seems to grip some people especially tightly during moments of brutal repression. Some people even posted cynical “I told you so” criticisms after the killing of Tortuguita. At the same time, these people do not hesitate to associate themselves with the movement when it provides them social capital. Despite individual smear campaigns like these, however, corporate media and law enforcement have failed to foster rival factions to pit against one another.



If movements cannot tolerate differences among their participants, they must be able to address them internally, directly or through mediators. If that is not possible, the conflicting tendencies or groups should ignore each other. Clarity about differences is important, but drawn-out conflicts between rival camps almost always benefit the authorities most of all. The more divisions in a movement, the more emboldened the authorities will be to target the most effective currents within it; when rivals post on social media about each other's errors or vulnerabilities, this can assist the authorities in strategizing or building a narrative to justify repression. Often such conflicts needlessly polarize entire movements, as everyone is compelled to take sides; many ideologies justify this kind of behavior, to everyone's misfortune. Unfortunately, contemporary social media platforms often incentivize this sort of conduct.

### **MOMENTUM BREEDS RESISTANCE**

Across the country, at least twenty acts of direct action followed the police raid of May 2022. With morale high after the third Week of Action, movement participants outside Atlanta were determined to preserve the initiative. Cultivating winning strategies is not simply a question of using the right tactics, nor of accumulating actions against a target. Rather, the strategy of targeting the logistics of the development on a decentralized basis has succeeded because it is *empowering*: it has enabled many people to participate in the movement on their own terms. At the same time, the whirlwind of different events and tactics has confused the Police Foundation, their bureaucratic supporters, and their contractors.

Morale is a crucial factor in struggle. Those who believe that they will win are more likely to win. They are more likely to respond urgently to attacks, to be prepared to make sacrifices, to confront problems rather than avoiding them. Oddly, in US-based autonomous movements, many of the most intelligent participants often embrace cynicism about the movements they participate in and the ideas they espouse. In doing so, they shrug off the responsibility to formulate effective plans, to test new hypotheses, to foster strong and diverse movements. Pessimism

and ironic detachment serve to excuse them from convincing people, working well with others, or carrying out courageous deeds.

At demonstrations, press conferences, and assemblies, in written statements, participants in the movement to defend the forest regularly exhibit an attitude of confidence. Stating that they intend to win this fight is not arrogant—it is a decision driven by real conviction. That conviction emerges from something greater than individual will.

## THE TREE PEOPLE

Several activists had established tree houses (“tree sits”) in the forest beginning on January 19, 2022. This was one of several interventions during a difficult period for the movement. At that time, Reeves+Young was still the general contractor for the Police Foundation. Their subcontractor, Long Engineering, was conducting surveying efforts and soil sampling excursions and activists were confused about how to stop them. Four months later, in May 2022, the situation had changed completely.

Coming out of the third Week of Action, movement groups dedicated to on-site resistance needed to innovate their form of struggle. If the news media continued broadcasting footage of hooded people throwing Molotov cocktails, that could embolden the police to utilize levels of force that few were prepared to resist. The tree sits made it possible to reframe the narrative.

At least half a dozen treehouses were constructed on the Old Atlanta Prison Farm and a section of Intrenchment Creek Park in late May 2022. The residents and architects gave them names and decorated them according to their tastes; some tree houses co-existed with adjacent ground camps. In the weeks following the raid, activists living in these tree houses drafted statements, gave interviews to the press, and took photographs documenting their determination. By June, the majority of news coverage—including in national press such as *The New Yorker*—had shifted to an almost anthropological interest in the exotic, romantic tree sitters.

The strategy of those who were seeking to destroy the forest also changed, though this took longer. At first, it did not seem clear to the



authorities that the raid of May 17 had failed. This only became evident when contractors with Long Engineering entered the forest near Constitution and Old Constitution Road on June 2. The construction crew arrived with a piece of tree-felling machinery, but without sufficient police detail; about ten activists easily repelled them. Aside from yelling and waving their arms, a few of these forest defenders tossed firecrackers in the direction of the work crews in order to get their attention. Work was canceled for the day.

For the next six months, no work took place inside the perimeter of the forest without considerable police protection.

## NEW OPENINGS

This was the beginning of a spiral of paranoia for the police agencies. On June 6, 2022, a convoy of police officers accompanied a work crew on Key Road. Workers with Boyette Brothers Construction Rental were knocking down trees at the side of the road. This was intended to be a part of the pre-construction phase of development that was meant to include the erection of an 8-foot security fence. Protesters approached the forest destroyers unarmed. Blowing whistles and waving their arms, forest defenders sought to enter the vicinity of work crews in a fashion likely to induce them to halt work. Without hesitating, police officers drew their weapons and pointed them directly at the protesters. Withdrawing into the woods, forest defenders managed to save their own lives, but they were not able to halt the destruction. By the end of the day, the workers had felled dozens of trees.

Later that evening, however, the machines they had used to destroy the trees were in ruins. An anonymous online communiqué stated that the company had been identified and their facilities located in Conyers, GA. The greater part of their fleet was vandalized, some of it burned. The online statement read *“If you build it, we will burn it.”*

On June 10, a few days later, the Dekalb County Government posted a “Stop Work” order at the entry gate to the Old Prison Farm, likely because of phone calls to various departments and commissions. Evidently, the aforementioned work had been undertaken without the proper permits, which still had not been approved by the county



government. After the sabotage and Stop Work order, not a single day of “pre-construction” work was attempted for nearly five months on the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. Other potential subcontractors who normally work for Brasfield & Gorrie may have been unwilling to bid on this contract in light of what took place at Boyette Brothers Rental.

Throughout the summer, initiatives to defend the forest continued to occur across the country. Acts of civil disobedience occurred at a Brasfield & Gorrie office in Charlotte, North Carolina. Protesters distributed fliers at the homes, neighborhoods, and churches of executives associated with the project. There were also acts of sabotage and vandalism at the offices of subcontractors. Every week, there seemed to be new statements and news articles.

New constellations and groups emerged within the movement during this time. The group of teachers, preschool students, and associated organizers who had organized the march in May continued to host walks, community events, and gardening days that brought children to the forest. Their participation as an organized group—the Weelaunee Coalition—enabled supporters with children to participate in the movement without having to commit to risky actions or find childcare for their kids. Such groups are not auxiliary forces that serve only to tidy up the movement’s reputation. They preserve their own strategic autonomy and discourse, engaging as all the other participants do, shaping the movement and taking responsibility for it in their own ways.

## LURING THEM IN

Political strategy develops as contending forces act and react to one another in a creative circuit, each identifying weaknesses in the opposing strategy and exploiting it. Strategies that solve one problem often produce another.

Throughout June and July and continuing well into fall, police began carrying out ritualistic “sweeps” of the forest, specifically the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. These sweeps typically involved five to twenty officers from the Atlanta Police Department. Because they were operating outside of their jurisdiction and were therefore unable to perform

arrests, these interventions were chiefly symbolic. On Tuesday mornings and sometimes Wednesdays or Fridays as well, officers would enter the so-called “North Gate” on Key Road. They would assemble for an hour or so before boarding Utility Task Vehicles (UTVs) or All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs).

Guessing that these sweeps were chiefly symbolic, activists refused to engage police during them. Hiding, running, climbing into tree houses, or otherwise remaining distant from officers became the defenders’ primary response, while the cops engaged in slashing tents, dumping out food, stealing water, and loitering. During this period, police agencies were being lured, consciously or not, into fruitless entanglements in the forest. With the activists obstructing their efforts, they could not move forward on the project, but they also could not find the well-hidden forest defenders.

The higher-ups received updates to the effect that protesters had abandoned the zone, which they passed along to the Atlanta Police Foundation. Apparently, the APF spread this misinformation to the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC), an organization contrived by the Atlanta Police Foundation and their advocates for the purpose of rubber-stamping Cop City under the pretense of democratic feedback.

Two people, Sharon Williams and Allison Clark, began to use CSAC as a platform to spread increasingly paranoid and far-fetched myths to the media. They were among the very first to denounce activists as “eco-terrorists.” As popular opinion turned against Cop City, the opinions of CSAC became more important to the project, as it was the only public group willing to stand in front of news cameras to defend it.

## **THE FOURTH WEEK OF ACTION**

Local groups announced the fourth Week of Action for the end of July. With such short time since the last Week of Action, it wasn’t clear what they could organize on a large scale. On the other hand, a construction timeline released by the Police Foundation expressed their intention to begin “Clearing and Grading”—a euphemism for felling trees and disturbing the land—before the end of summer. If the third Week of

Action had essentially been an exercise in mass convergence and direct action, the next one would have to be something else entirely.

## THE SOUND OF MUSIC

New ideas rarely arise from politics; they are merely translated into it. Innovations in thinking and language do not emerge from reflection and conversation alone. Just as some professional athletes take dance classes in the off season, rebels and aspiring revolutionaries have long drawn inspiration from literature, poetry, art, and music—perhaps the only form of human activity that immanently channels the shared vibrancy and intensity common to all beings and systems in the cosmos.

Black liberation movements have always had a generative relationship with Black music. This relationship nourishes the struggle, helping to transmit cultural and political knowledge, lessons, and awareness. Music plays a similarly important role in many Indigenous struggles. By contrast, some predominantly white movements do not ascribe a comparable role to music and art. Some participants attempt to compensate with militant fantasies, or uncritically consume cultural innovations without understanding what is powerful about them. Some activists may even cynically conceal themselves in cultural circles, biding their time until the “real” action can begin.

Happily, the movement to defend Weelaunee is not one of those movements. This struggle constantly replenishes its connection to music, arts communities, and cultural events. It would be difficult to overstate the impact this has had on the longevity and creativity of the forest defense, both in the woods, downtown, and around the region.

When the fourth Week of Action was announced, an autonomous organizing group declared that they would be coordinating a free music festival in the forest. Within a few days, a local folk artist popular with alternative Black youth announced his intention to organize one as well. Artists and musicians began reaching out. Soon, full lineups were assembled including performers from the regional dance, indie, folk, hip hop, and hardcore punk music scenes. Other people announced additional workshops and actions. Music journalists began reaching out

to local organizers, expressing the desire to camp out with the protesters and attend the music events.

## WEELAUNEE PEOPLE'S PARK

In the days leading up to the Week of Action slated to begin on July 23, Ryan Millsap of Blackhall Studios began to work with Dekalb police to block access to Intrenchment Creek Park. Over the previous weeks, Blackhall Studios had been renamed Shadowbox Studios following its acquisition by Commonwealth Asset Management, an investment firm that Millsap sits on the board of. Millsap believed that this sale nullified his agreements with the Dekalb County government to develop a nearby clear-cut (which he had already destroyed) into “Michelle Obama Park” in return for building a soundstage complex. Via this ruse, he hoped to legally steal about 40 acres located in and around the Intrenchment Creek Park trailhead, including a section of the PATH Foundation bicycle and walking trail, the RC Field, and some of the forest.

Ongoing lawsuits coordinated by activists with the South River Watershed Alliance were one of the only things preventing this land grab from moving forward. According to the terms of the lawsuit, the forest was not to be substantially disturbed and the park was to remain accessible to the public until the case was resolved in court. While those pursuing the lawsuit and related efforts to arrive at courtroom solutions were operating at a distance from the rest of the movement, most of the activists occupying the forest or pressuring contractors considered these strategies to be legitimate means of defending the land.

The City of Atlanta government had adopted “The South River Forest Vision,” the vision of the Watershed Alliance, as the official purpose for this land before shifting to the Cop City proposal after the George Floyd rebellion. The teams working on the lawsuits serve the forest as a defensive bulwark, exemplified by the Stop Work order of June 10, but they also constitute one of the offensive fronts of the struggle. If the movement wins, that will likely manifest itself as a decision in the courts.

On July 19, Ryan Millsap violated the agreement to keep the park

accessible to the public. This was hardly the only time he did so. Legal defense is an important part of a holistic strategy, but it will not suffice to prevent the destruction of the land.

Late on the afternoon of July 19, contractors accompanied by Dekalb County Sheriffs erected concrete barriers in the driveway of In-trenchment Creek Park Trailhead, blocking access to the parking lot. Presumably, Millsap believed that this would keep people out of the park during the Week of Action. With hundreds of people preparing to camp in the forest and bands expecting to play there, it seemed urgent to remove the barriers and reorient around this section of the forest for the time being, since pre-construction efforts in the Prison Farm had come to a halt.

On the night of July 21, a group calling themselves “100 Cute Little Ants” moved the heavy barriers to the side, opening enough space for one or two cars to enter at a time. The new placement of the barriers allowed civilians to enter with ease, but made it difficult to operate large machinery or vehicles in the small entranceway facing West Side Place. People redecorated the gray barriers with pink paint and slogans.

The Week of Action launched on July 23 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony that drew over 100 people. A lovely official-looking sign was planted in the ground reading “Weelaunee People’s Park” on one side and “South River Forest Park” on the other. After cutting the ribbon, the assembled crowd chanted “People’s park, people’s park!” while cars and equipment began loading in. By afternoon, hundreds of people filled the area.

While parkgoers and forest defenders set up camps and listened to the first live performances, others organized home demonstrations. Beginning on July 25, protesters visited the homes of various Brasfield & Gorrie executives, chanting and holding banners. Police response to these demonstrations escalated over the course of the week, creating an atmosphere of danger at what were in fact legal protests.

On the other side of the forest, a surveillance technology startup named Flock Safety began to install security cameras on small towers. On July 25, two days into the Week of Action, a group of forest defenders confronted a work truck associated with Flock Safety. The worker inside had just installed a new surveillance camera on Key Road.

Activists chased off the truck by throwing gravel at it, breaking one of its windows, and dismantled the new camera. This action in which no one was injured contributed to the spiraling paranoia of law enforcement.

Over the following days, Sharon Williams and Allison Clark of the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC) worked with bureaucrats in the police department to spread the falsehood that activists had fired a gun at the Flock Safety worker. The only “evidence” they offered was a random bullet casing on the side of the road. Enterprising community members placed fliers refuting this claim in mailboxes throughout the surrounding neighborhood.

Ordinary police officers are not immune to police propaganda. To this day, many of them still believe that forest defenders shot at a construction worker. Right-wing trolls and the local District Attorney repeated this lie at every opportunity. Thanks to this lie publicized by Williams and Clark, the temperature increased.

## THE KIDS WILL HAVE THEIR SAY

The music festival began on July 28. The promotional materials promised three days of “Peace, Love, and Anarchy.” Musicians performed on a makeshift stage beneath tarps strung between poles and trees. The sound system was powered by generators. Attendees could help themselves to pamphlets and other informational materials as well as clothes, water, and food.

Over the first two days, hundreds of people passed through the area, listening to the music pulsing through a small clearing in the pines. Tents and small encampments popped up everywhere. The crowd was diverse by any measure, bringing together people from different ethnic backgrounds; the styles of music were not segmented into distinct days or blocs, but flowed in and out of each other exclusively according to the principle of starting slowly and picking up steam. Together, the attendees created a transformative experience, far from the corporate venues and controlled musical experiences most were used to.

On July 30, the final day of the Week of Action, campers woke up to shouting: *“They are going to tow your car! Everybody wake up! A tow truck*

*is here! Get to the parking lot!”*

Around 8 am, Ryan Millsap and a colleague of his arrived at Weelaunee People’s Park with a tow truck pulling an excavator atop a flat-bed trailer, accompanied by a small cohort of Dekalb County police he had hired as private security. In Georgia, you can legally hire off-duty police, who are permitted to bring their service weapons, uniforms, and city-owned vehicles with them while fulfilling a private contract. This is unusual in other parts of the Global North, but common enough elsewhere in the Americas.

Millsap did not venture far from his car, but his colleague, Anthony Wayne James, approached forest defenders who were seated beneath a gazebo in the middle of the parking lot. James began using the excavator to hit the roof of the gazebo, despite the potentially lethal risk that this posed to those beneath it. At this point, the cops-for-hire intervened, notifying James that it was not acceptable for him to attempt to risk killing people in front of them. Frustrated, he began screaming at them to arrest people: “Do your jobs!”

In a few minutes, more people began arriving from the tree line, most of them wearing masks and hoodies. One person addressed the crowd, now consisting of perhaps 40 people: “Are we going to do something or are we going to just stand here?” Promptly, this person pulled a hammer from their waistline and began smashing the windows of Millsap’s pickup truck. At the sight of the vandalism, the police faltered. A light hail of stones and beverage cans began to fall upon James, Millsap, and the Dekalb Police, all of whom rushed back to the street.

Some people continued to destroy the truck, while others assembled piles of rocks anticipating additional confrontation. The concrete barricade which had been constructed on Millsap’s orders some days earlier was now used to close off the parking lot; others added tires and wooden pallets. More police vehicles attempted to approach; these, too, were pelted with stones. Millsap, cowering behind officers in a blind rage, was screaming epithets at the crowd: “Go buy your own park! Stop being homeless!”

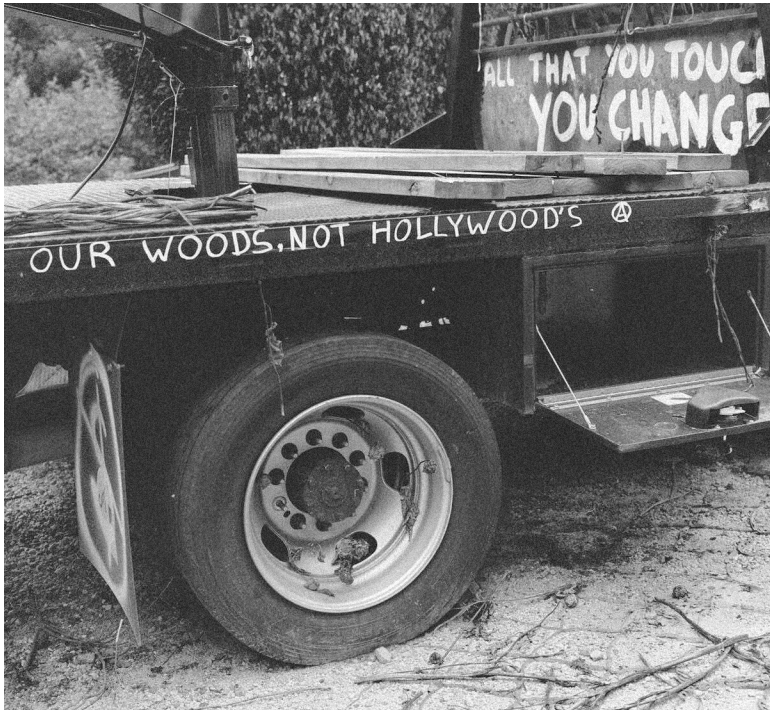
Half an hour later, his truck was in pieces. The catalytic converter was removed, the interior was stripped, the engine was destroyed. After an hour or more of calm, it became clear the police were not going to

return. The crowd, which had grown to about 100, slowly dispersed back into the forest or returned to town. Activists listened to presentations or prepared for the final night of music.

Eventually, after everyone had dispersed from the parking lot, someone set the truck on fire. The smoke billowed above the tree line. The park is across the street from a fire station, and a fire truck doused the truck from the street. Some feared that the sight of the charred truck might deter people from attending the workshops or music events, which were intended to draw locals to the forest who had no prior experience in movements of this nature and who might already have been cautious about participating.

“We don’t know what will happen,” one long-term forest occupant enjoined others. “Let’s see. Let’s not freak out.”

In the end, that person was right. The truck became a monument to the fortitude and courage of the movement. People did not hesitate to attend the presentations that historians and academics offered that





day.

By nightfall, hundreds of concert-goers were pouring into the park for the festival's final evening. Many of them took pictures with the remains of the truck or decorated it with graffiti. As the show picked up momentum, a joyous throng moshed as a series of hardcore punk bands took the stage. Then they were swaying and bouncing to the sound of post-punk indie rockers, then gyrating to the disco-influenced beats and repetitive thumping of the late-night DJs. Midway through the night, it began to rain. The tarps covered all who wished to stay dry, but some chose to soak themselves in the water descending through the tree canopy above.

Between sets, people read aloud from fliers and handbills. Some performers led chants of "Stop cop city!" and "Defend the forest!" Organizers repeatedly took the microphone to explain the movement's goals, emphasizing its autonomous and decentralized nature, enjoining everyone assembled to take personal responsibility for giving life to it.

Many concert-goers affirmed that this was one of the greatest experiences of their lives.

## FALL

Many participants in the movement, especially those who lived in the encampments, expected the fourth Week of Action to be followed by a massive raid, just as the third one had been. The Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee was spreading lies about the alleged use of firearms against a Flock Safety worker. A feeling of dread dominated some sections of the movement.

Four days later, on August 3, 2022, a large operation did indeed occur around the forest. On Bouldercrest Road, Key Road, Fayetteville Road, Constitution, and Old Constitution—all of the streets adjacent to the section of forest that was occupied—construction workers and utility companies initiated work, accompanied by police officers and security guards. Some of these workers were doing electrical maintenance; others were working on the plumbing beneath the street, or potholes, sewage maintenance, or other municipal projects in the immediate vicinity of the forest. Georgia Power, the electrical company

that is funding the APF, used industrial lawn mowers in a section of Weelaunee People's Park to create an easement via which they could perform maintenance tasks. Given the chance to destroy a community garden built by pre-school children a week earlier, however, they opted to go around it.

It was hard to tell what was happening. But it was clear what was *not* happening.

The operation was not attacking tree sitters. It was ignoring them. It was not felling trees, nor was it constructing a fence. After weeks of expectation, however, it was hard to not perceive all of this work as connected to some sort of repressive operation in the forest. And perhaps it was. Perhaps the Dekalb County contractors were there on behalf of the APF, or Millsap, or other corporate interests aiming to increase carrying capacity of the roads for the sake of large machinery, or the capacity of the electrical grid for the future Cop City infrastructure. Some of the companies had paper sheets taped over their logos. Was that because they didn't want to be identified as subcontractors for Brasfield & Gorrie? Or because police had misled them to believe that everyone in the area was in danger of imminent harm at the hands of vicious protesters living in the woods?

To this day, we don't know. Over the following months, the situation remained confusing. Every week, coverage of the movement appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *The Guardian*, CNN, Vice, the Intercept, NPR, Fox, MSNBC, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*. The movement had reached a new threshold of publicity, almost all of which was favorable.

At the same time, what had been an innovative movement seemed to be stabilizing into its simplest and most reproducible elements. Since the deforestation had definitively stalled, it was difficult to identify exactly who was working with Brasfield & Gorrie—though that didn't stop activists from trying to figure it out. Call-in campaigns, home demonstrations, and other actions continued, especially against Atlas Technical Consultants, the parent company of Long Engineering, which worked under Reeves+Young.

## GRIDLOCK AND INNOVATION

Because it was difficult to gather up-to-date information, activists could not tell whether their strategy was working. Beyond the apparent stalemate in the forest and the persistence of the camps, it was unclear whether pressuring contractors and subcontractors was having an effect. Ironically, this scenario resulted from the victories that defensive groups had achieved on the ground, as well as the Stop Work order for the Prison Farm.

The few statements that law enforcement made to the press suggested that everyone was passing the buck: Dekalb Police were deferring responsibility to Atlanta Police, who were deferring to the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, who were deferring to the Department of Homeland Security, who were waiting for the CSAC to establish their priorities, who were waiting on reports from police. Because no one was sending workers into the forest and none of the companies were making statements to the press (aside from whistleblowers inside a few companies leaking information to movement researchers), it was impossible to judge the effectiveness of the strategies at play.

One consequence of this stalemate was a tendency towards less precisely targeted actions. Some people even advocated this. Aside from the regular sabotage of Flock Safety cameras in the area, some individuals apparently sought to turn the forest itself—previously a zone of defensive operations—into an offensive front. From September to November, a number of actions occurred targeting infrastructure around the forest, including some incendiary attacks. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone living in the forest was involved in any of these actions, though the police later attributed all the actions to them specifically.

On one occasion, equipment was torched that belonged to Norfolk Southern, a funder of the police foundation (and incidentally, the corporation behind a train derailment and toxic chemical catastrophe in East Palestine, Ohio on February 3, 2023). On another occasion, in early November, a man showed up with a flatbed trailer and began antagonizing parkgoers and forest defenders, insisting on his right to

remove the burned remains of Millsap's truck. After a brief altercation, his truck also caught fire. Later, he told the media he had no idea what was happening, and that he was simply a victim of violent crime. On another occasion, an annex building belonging to Shadowbox/Blackhall caught fire. Several pieces of heavy machinery parked in an area near the forest were sabotaged, perhaps in response to information connecting them to the planned developments. Finally, in November, someone sabotaged the electrical powerlines serving the police shooting range located in a section of the forest, disabling the entrance.

While all of this was happening, most segments of the movement seemed inert. The tools that the movement had developed were simple, but they weren't proliferating. Nature walks and community events were still being organized with the pre-schools; weekly dinners were still taking place in the park, as well as workshops and trainings, rallies and press conferences, concerts and parties. Yet none of these had broken through the imperceptible wall that kept the movement on a plateau.

One group of amateur builders constructed an incredible kitchen in the parking lot of Weelaunee People's Park, dubbing it the "Weelaunee Café." For weeks, potlucks and meetups took place there. Elsewhere in the forest, a team dedicated themselves to building a visually stunning warming shelter. The movement hardly lacked moral support or passive sympathy.

Still, no form of large-scale activity emerged in this period. Only the self-directed activity of large numbers of people can mobilize the kind of collective potential that can prevail over structures of authoritarian power. This is the strength that mass uprisings, general strikes, and insurrections are able to bring to bear that activist campaigns are not. The movement had made strides, but it had not broken out of the political isolation that limits so many movements.

Perhaps specialization contributed to this impasse. Focused groups working tirelessly on particular tasks can accomplish many things. They can operate counter-surveillance teams or maintain camps; they can oversee legal initiatives and attend civic hearings; they can conduct interviews and advise journalists; they can organize meetings or canvassing teams; they can work tirelessly on jail support or legal aid; they

can organize benefits and fundraisers...

But there are limits to what specialized groups can accomplish. They are often unable to create the sort of expanding participatory momentum that movements need to win. As they become more skilled at their chosen tasks, it can be hard for them to keep the barriers to entry low, to connect newcomers to their own agency. Insofar as the various standard forms of engagement reproduce roles in the movement, this can contribute to a bottleneck, as the majority of enthusiasm comes from people without special skills or connections, who cannot easily integrate themselves into the confusing web of functions let alone arrange for contacts from previous struggles to vouch for their trustworthiness. In all of these ways, specialized groups can unintentionally limit the movements they build, bringing about a *de facto* form of political containment.

Following the George Floyd rebellion of 2020, it is possible that the most acute tensions within future movements will not emerge around the question of violence (as 20 years ago), nor the identities of the participants (as 10 years ago), but rather, over the tension between specialization and participation. After 2020, we sorely need forms of action and thought that can enable social upheaval to transform people, cultivating new social bodies and organizational forms rather than simply combining what already exists. Only time will tell whether the movement in Atlanta can contribute to these new politics, or if it will only express the terminus of the political intelligence cultivated by the movements of the preceding years.

## PREPARING FOR A CLAMPDOWN

Meanwhile, throughout the fall, the forest destroyers were developing a new media strategy, as the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee, the Department of Homeland Security, and Georgia Governor Brian Kemp got involved.

After the fourth Week of Action, these groups began experimenting with openly criminalizing the movement. Sharon Williams, Allison Clark, and various law enforcement agents began using the phrase “eco-terrorist” in their meetings and press briefings. They worked with

local news outlets to spread unfounded stories, like the falsehood about forest defenders shooting a Flock Safety worker. Some of these stories were not just exaggeration, but pure fabrication, including claims that forest defenders were vandalizing homes, mugging people, or stealing cars. Nothing of the sort had occurred. When the scrapper came into the forest to steal the remains of Millsap's truck, he told police he "feared for [his] life" and that he was nearly "burned alive," another falsehood.

In all likelihood, high-ranking authorities in the local government and state and federal agencies have a fairly clear picture of what they are up against. This does not stop them from spreading conspiracy theories and lies to rank-and-file officers, APF funders, and their supporters. For officers on the ground, however, the ability to distinguish talking points from reality was becoming dangerously blurred. For them, everything bad in southwest Dekalb County was the fault of a few dozen young people eating off of propane stoves and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes.

But that was the kind of narrative their bosses needed to justify the violence they were about to unleash.

## THE REPRESSION

The stalemate broke in December.

In fall 2022, it was not uncommon to hear activists speculate that the winter months would see the police and their allies regroup—especially in the forest, where tree cover and foliage would be reduced. But no one was prepared for what transpired.

Following weeks of propaganda, a massive inter-agency raid encircled the forest on December 13. Under the direction of the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, officers from the Atlanta Police, the Dekalb Police, the Bomb Squad, and the Department of Homeland Security entered the forest from Key, Constitution, Fayetteville, Bouldercrest, and West Park Place. They advanced on foot from Constitution and Fayetteville. Drones hovered overhead and helicopters circled above the trees with thermal cameras trained on the encampments. Officers in riot gear equipped with off-road vehicles invaded the Prison Farm through the North Gate with firearms at the ready.

Activists withdrew to treehouses or hiding spots or else fled the forest altogether. Since there were no subcontractors present, few chose to resist the operation; forest defenders did not want to be caught in conflicts with police that did not actually delay construction. Previously, this had seemed like the wisest idea, especially after the symbolic sweeps of the forest began. But this was an extraction mission: rather than escorting excavators or subcontractors or making a symbolic appearance, the police intended to make arrests and destroy camps. In hindsight, if more people had arrived to resist, things might have turned out differently. Some people in the forest did clash with officers, mostly by throwing stones and erecting barricades.

The police wrecked dozens of tents and campsites. They bulldozed the Weelaunee Café. They used chainsaws to demolish the warming station along with hammocks, tables, medic stations, water bottles, and makeshift stages. A cherry picker entered the forest; arborists used it to destroy unoccupied tree houses. Officers who were able to locate forest defenders positioned in the trees stood beneath them, insulting and threatening them. Police pointed firearms at tree-sitters; they shot them with pepper balls, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Atlanta police unleashed attack dogs on activists moving on foot through the forest.

By the end of the day, five people were under arrest. All of them were slapped with felony charges including “Domestic Terrorism.”

## **WE ARE ALL FOREST DEFENDERS**

The movement responded immediately. A press conference met on December 14 outside Weelaunee People’s Park. The park was temporarily closed off by police, who illegally closed access to the land with their vehicles during a second day of operations in the forest. They had not successfully evicted all of the tree houses, so they returned to complete their goal. While Dekalb County cops were in the forest shooting pepper balls at Tortuguita—at the time, known only as an anonymous activist occupying a tree house—activists and community members gathered outside of the park to deliver speeches to the local news media. This did not end the raid, as the press conference in May 2022 had, but it did draw away police resources to the parking lot, especially after

activists breached the police line by walking into the edge of the forest, bringing news crews with them to photograph riot police in the ruins of the Weelaunee Café and park gazebo.

Footage from the press conference played repeatedly on local television. Another person was arrested in the vicinity of the forest and charged with “Domestic Terrorism.” Nonetheless, the police operation failed to remove the remaining tree-sitters and the other activists who remained in the forest. Over the following days, national coverage of the repression appeared on Democracy Now!, CNN, and other outlets.

All of the various organizations and tendencies involved in the movement came together to defend the accused. Other groups, including socialists and others who had kept distance from the movement for whatever reason, stepped up to denounce the repression of the six young arrestees.

On December 16, the Dekalb County government denied the “Land Disturbance Permit” required to begin the destruction of the Old Atlanta Prison farm. This was the fourth time that an application for the permit was denied. The next day, 200 people gathered in East Atlanta Village. At that point, this was one of the biggest local protests in the context of the movement. Speakers from local Black liberation organizations, a pre-school, a solidarity organization, and within the movement denounced the repression. “We cannot allow six young people to rot in prison for taking actions we all agree are necessary,” one person declared to a cheering crowd. The whole crowd shared the sense that this attack on the forest occupants constituted an attack on the movement as a whole.

After an hour of fiery speeches, the crowd gathered behind a banner demanding that Brasfield & Gorrie drop the contract with the APF and another declaring “We Are All Forest Defenders.” They marched around the business and residential area for an hour, drawing applause and cheers. In many ways, the police assault had fostered sympathy with the movement, not paralysis.

For their part, the police claimed that this was a long and dangerous confrontation “finally coming to a head,” implying that the movement was over. Nothing could be further from the truth.



## DESTRUCTION IN WEELAUNEE PEOPLE'S PARK

On December 21, a week after the raid, Ryan Millsap and his henchman entered Weelaunee People's Park. Nearly eight months after his attempt to destroy the area during the third Week of Action, he finally had a free hand.

They brought bulldozers and heavy machinery into the area through the entrance of the Radio Control club. Reportedly, the Georgia Bureau of Investigations requested this for the explicit purpose of denying anarchists the ability to operate freely in the forest. They knocked down dozens of trees along the paved bicycle path, overturned the park gazebo, and cut down a large number of saplings and bushes. By midday, they had destroyed substantial swaths of the forest near the parking lot and trailhead, creating clear lines of sight at ground level. It will never be known how many nonhuman inhabitants of the forest this operation killed or displaced. This was the first destruction of the forest at that scale. When a few journalists arrived at the scene, the contractors withdrew.

The next day, December 22, the contractors returned. This time, they demolished the parking lot with heavy machinery and tore up a large segment of the paved bicycle path. They worked quickly. No police officers accompanied them. Only one man in a "Peace Officer" jacket oversaw the parking lot area. When a few forest defenders and journalists arrived, the contractors fled once again. Work trucks associated with a company called Stake Center were nearby; they have been seen numerous times in the vicinity of the forest, but it remains unclear who was executing the destruction at Millsap's behest.

In the hours following the second day of destruction, community members called the Dekalb County Commissioners and various departments to notify them of the work taking place. Within a few hours, two Dekalb County police officers cautiously approached the parking lot, which was now in ruins. They anxiously notified those assembled that they would soon be returning with a "Stop Work" order. They asked protesters to allow them to do so undisturbed.

With "Stop Work" orders now in effect in both sides of the forest,



many people in the movement felt a bit of temporary relief. Yet there was nothing preventing police from entering the forest to remove encampments or to attack movement infrastructure.

## REGAINING CONFIDENCE

In the final weeks of December, the movement worked hard to rearrange priorities and regain confidence. The encampments in the Old Atlanta Prison Farm held firm in the face of the repression. Local musicians and artists organized a “Rock Against Repression” fundraiser for those facing terrorism charges; several hundred people attended. Jail support and legal aid teams worked tirelessly in a superhuman effort to assure the safety of the accused. Activists and lawyers from around the country offered assistance along with advice distilled from previous eras of repression, including the Green Scare.

The movement was drawing national attention, especially from outlets like Motherboard that were concerned about the politically-charged prosecution of forest defenders. Far-right trolls also took notice, siding with the authorities by organizing doxing efforts and smear campaigns targeting the accused.

Dekalb County District Attorney Sherri Boston and police spokespeople were arguing that affiliation with the Defend the Atlanta Forest movement was itself a legitimate basis for the terrorism charges. According to the government, some of the acts that “affirmed” one’s

“belonging” in the movement included camping in the forest, being in the forest during a raid, posting about the movement on social media, and protesting against the destruction of the forest. Prosecutors falsely claimed that the Department of Homeland Security had “classified” the movement as a Domestic Violent Extremist Group.

Once again, this was a falsehood. Homeland Security internal documentation on criminal action is simply that: internal memos regarding actions and events. Even if they had classified the entire movement as a domestic terror group, that would have been a clerical matter, not a legal one. But DHS does not classify movements, as seen in their rejection of Donald Trump’s absurd demand that they categorize “Antifa” as a terrorist group.

To discourage continued attacks on the forest and rebuild morale within the movement, people began organizing daily vigils in the ruins of the parking lot. Early each morning, dozens of people met to eat breakfast and drink coffee in the former parking lot of Weelaunee People’s Park. This positioned them to learn immediately of police interventions or the arrival of heavy machinery.

No contractors or police showed up on the mornings of the vigils. Without more data points, we can’t know whether the morning vigils impacted the timeline for the destruction of the forest. In the future, perhaps similar creative tactics could be used to mobilize those who cannot sleep overnight in the forest, assuming the land itself remains a contested zone.

On New Year’s Eve, hundreds of people converged in the forest. Neighbors, ravers, and activists assembled beneath a new gazebo that had been covertly assembled over the course of the day in a section of the park just barely outside of the zone that Millsap claims to own. Glow sticks illuminated a walking path through the destruction toward the sound of thumping music. A local queer collective organized the party, which was a major success.

For many people, returning to the forest had become fraught and stressful. Many attendees said they hoped that this party marked the turning of the tide against those who wished to destroy the forest.

## INJUNCTION OVERRULED

After the destruction of December 21, legal advocates filed a request for an injunction against Ryan Millsap with the Dekalb County court. The appeal highlighted the continuous abuse of the land by Millsap and his goons and the persistent violations of the terms of the land-swap deal struck between Millsap and Dekalb County, including his repeated attempts to close access to the park and his decision to tear up the bicycle path connecting the trailhead he claims to own to several other parks that he makes no legal claim to.

On December 28, the judge denied the appeal, groundlessly associating it with the protests and brazenly asserting “the damage being done to the property by those folks inhabiting it is far worse than anything anybody else is doing at this point.” She was parroting a cliché often repeated by other opponents of the movement—right, left, bureaucratic, and grassroots alike—that the protests were doing more harm than good. Protesters had not clear-cut trees, destroyed public infrastructure, or blocked public access to the park.

In her closing remarks, she made it explicitly clear that Ryan Millsap was free to continue destroying the forest however he liked, regardless of agreements with Dekalb County or anything else. The Dekalb County Office of Planning and Sustainability had rejected this idea when they issued their Stop Work order on December 22. At present, as consequence of that order, Millsap cannot continue destroying Weelaunee without permits. But as a consequence of the January 3 ruling, he is free to apply for the permits that would allow him to do so.

The truth is, nothing will prevent Millsap from resuming the destruction of the forest except the bold, creative resistance of ordinary people.

## JANUARY 18, 2023

During the first half of January, the situation in the forest encampments had changed, but activists were adapting to it. Outside the forest, organizers were also strategizing, trying to figure out how to respond to repression while regaining the initiative. Almost every organizing cluster

was busy with meetings, phone calls, interviews, and similar tasks.

At the same time, new antagonists appeared, likely drawn by all the news coverage. Congressperson Marjorie Taylor Greene, former president Donald Trump, and their legion of online imitators began commenting on the movement, cartoonishly describing it as an “ANTIFA autonomous zone.” Capitalizing on this demagoguery, bigger outlets began using the intentionally misleading description “the area, referred to as an ‘ANTIFA autonomous zone.’” Local fascists began surveilling the movement by pretending to be journalists. Many adherents of the far right demanded that Governor Brian Kemp clamp down on the movement.

Since metro-area police had failed to crush the encampments, the governor decided to try his hand by sending in the Georgia State Patrol (GSP). These officers, the extreme majority of whom are white men who live far outside the city limits, normally conduct traffic stops on the interstate; they have very little experience controlling protests. The surge of propaganda throughout the fall and the raid of December 13 were pushing the conflict into new terrain.

What experiences the Georgia State Patrol *has* had with protests only underscore the tensions already existing between the GSP and activists. On November 27, 2014, following the failure of a grand jury to indict Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson for the killing of Michael Brown in Missouri, GSP responded to protesters on the I-75/I-85 connector, attacking Black women and others who were passively blocking the road. On July 4, 2020, a black bloc vandalized the headquarters of the Georgia State Patrol, breaking windows and starting fires inside the building. Later that summer, GSP agents attacked crowds from within armored Bearcat vehicles, shooting tear canisters at protesters’ heads.

It is possible that aside from these episodes, few current GSP officers had ever engaged with a protest in Atlanta. In any case, these cops almost certainly believed the false narratives of their bosses and the members of the Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee. GSP entered the forest anticipating violence, prepared to kill those living in the encampments.

## THE SHOOTING

In the early hours of January 18, police established an operations control center in the parking lot of Gresham Park. Dozens of police vehicles from metro-Atlanta agencies began amassing there. Across the forest, other agencies spearheaded by Atlanta Police Department began amassing on Key, Fayetteville, Woodham, and adjacent streets. Helicopters were circling overhead. Forest defenders could hear the sounds of police drones hovering near their tree houses and tents. K9 units arrived with dogs. The bomb squad was stationed nearby, while all-black SUVs parked alongside Constitution Road near Shadowbox Studios. For the first time, the Georgia State Patrol entered Weelaunee People's Park.

At 9:04 am, some 30 or more shots rang out in the forest.

The Georgia State Patrol had killed Manuel Páez Terán, a Venezuelan anarchist of Tomoto-Cuica heritage who went by the name Tortuguita in the forest.

Tortuguita had been living in the forest since May 2022. During their time in Atlanta, they had endeared themselves to many other forest defenders. They coordinated mutual aid efforts for those living in the forest, something they had experience doing in Tallahassee for the homeless as well as victims of natural disasters. They were known to be very brave and very warm to those close to them. They died defending the forest. Their death is an incalculable loss.

Horribly, the operation did not end there. Over the next several hours, officers continued to fan out through the forest, shamelessly continuing their assault. Once again, they smashed camp infrastructure, pointed guns at park-goers, and fired pepper balls into the tree houses. One courageous person living in a tree house was encircled by law enforcement, who sent an arborist into the tree. The arborist destroyed the tree house, but the activist climbed higher, refusing to come down.

The activist remained suspended in the air supported by a harness for nearly 19 hours. Police did not leave the foot of the tree for the entire day and then, for the first time, remained in the forest after dark. At last, the tree sitter came down and was also arrested.

Five of the people who survived the lethal assault on the forest were arrested and charged with Domestic Terrorism.

## TORTUGUITA VIVE, LA LUCHA SIGUE

As the morning of January 18 passed into afternoon, it was still not known who had been killed. What was known, thanks to a press conference police held at midday, was that a patrolman had been shot. To this day, the authorities have released no information about who this patrolman was or how they were shot. Without more information, we cannot know whether this officer shot himself, was shot by a fellow officer—as subsequently released police video showed officers concerned about crossfire and one declaring “You fucked your own officer up”—or was shot by a forest defender acting in self-defense.

The initial phase of police propaganda claimed that agents had been “ambushed” by a shooter. The *New York Times* invented the idea that the shooting had occurred during a “firefight” in the woods. Later, the Georgia Bureau of Investigations changed their story, claiming that agents had encountered someone in a tent (sic), ordered them to exit, and that person opened fire “without warning” on patrolmen. Yet the photo they released to accompany their story did not show a tent, but a hammock. Unlike a tent, hammocks do not occlude any line of sight. One cannot “hide” in a hammock, which is precisely why the GBI decided to use the word “tent” in their campaign of lies.

On January 19, after careful deliberation, forest defenders decided that it was not acceptable to permit the police to be the first ones to announce the name of the deceased. Many were concerned that such an announcement would include an effort to smear Tortuguita’s reputation, as is customary for police seeking to justify the murders they frequently carry out. It was better to get ahead of the propaganda machine.

Whether or not Tortuguita fired at officers during the raid is not known. Owing to the difficulties, we may never know the details. Since every police agency that could investigate the event was participating in the operation, none of them are credible sources on this subject; even the District Attorney acknowledged this by recusing herself of the

case. None of the killers were wearing body cameras and no credible witnesses have stepped forward yet.

What is undeniable is that Tortuguita (who was also known as Geese, Onka, Cami, Manny, and other names) dedicated their life to defending the forest and its inhabitants, to the planet and all of its oppressed peoples. Despite the escalating violence directed at them, they remained steadfastly committed to resisting the militarization of the police and the destruction of the planet up to the last. This is why the police killed them.

On the night of the killing, around 200 people gathered in Findley Plaza in Little 5 Points. Despite the rain, this crowd assembled to light candles and to defend space for those in grief. Some attendees read statements or delivered speeches. Others stood in silence. Many cried.

Most of those gathered blocked Moreland Avenue. When a police cruiser approached, a few people threw objects at it to send it away. The crowd slowly marched down Euclid Avenue, dragging debris into the street. Someone smashed a storefront window. Eventually, everyone calmly dispersed.

## **INDOMITABLE RESISTANCE**

Over the following days, coverage of the movement reached international proportions. Corporate outlets throughout the Western world ran articles about the killing and the movement to defend the forest. Another vigil was announced for Friday, January 20, in Weelaunee People's Park. Similar actions and vigils were announced in dozens of other cities across the US and around the world. Some of those vigils were quite large, considering the context and cold weather; the events in Richmond, Portland, New York, Chicago, and Austin drew over 100 people each. Altogether, several thousand people mobilized that weekend in Tortuguita's memory.

The vigil in Weelaunee People's Park was attended by around 100 people and a number of undercover police officers. Officers in riot gear were stationed nearby. However, the vigil took place without incident. It was important for people to be able to gather near the site of the killing as a community, to listen to some of the songs Tort had adored,



to share space with one another and grieve.

That night, solidarity actions took place around the country. A UPS facility was vandalized in Portland because UPS funds the Atlanta Police Foundation. An office of Atlas Technical Consultants was vandalized in Detroit on account of their contract with Brasfield & Gorrie. In Oakland, dozens of windows were broken at a Bank of America in memory of Tortuguita. Bank of America is also a sponsor of the APF.

On Saturday, January 21, around 300 people gathered at Underground Atlanta, a plaza and shopping mall downtown. The majority of this crowd wore black clothing to mourn Tortuguita's passing, as the flier requested. Around 5 pm, members of a nationwide socialist organization began making speeches to the crowd from behind their banners. On occasion, they passed around the megaphone to those who asked for it. Nobody else seemed prepared to deliver speeches, but the socialists on the megaphone had not organized this event, they simply had arrived aiming to instrumentalize those assembled for their own political aims. This is a strategy they use effectively, especially in power plays targeting spontaneous movements, in which organizers may not be prepared to give speeches themselves.

Around 5:45, the crowd set off from the plaza in the direction of the State Capitol building. A contingent of about a hundred people wearing black hooded sweatshirts and masks halted the crowd and began marching the opposite direction, explaining to others that this was the original plan for the route. Finally, Tortuguita's friends and comrades were in the front.

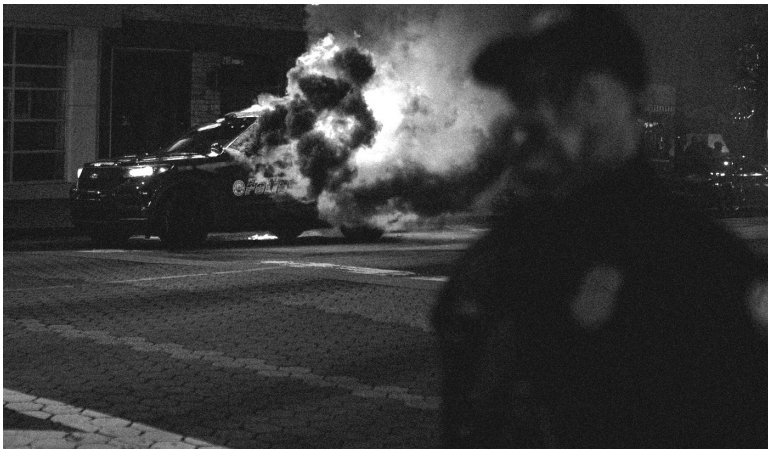
The crowd turned onto Peachtree Street heading north. Colorful smoke began to drift above the throng. Some pedestrians joined the march. Rush-hour foot and car traffic in the city center gave audience to the demonstrators as they chanted "*Cop City will never be built!*" and "*Cops, pigs, murders!*" Just north of the Peachtree Center MARTA station, an Atlanta police SUV attempted to turn around, backing up after a demonstrator threw a firework at it. The officers parked the car and jogged away. When the crowd reached the vehicle, they broke its windows.

The police vehicle was parked directly in front of the Deloitte Tower. The Atlanta Police Foundation headquarters is on the ground

floor; it was already vandalized once, during the first Week of Action in 2021. On the night of January 21, 2023, several people threw rocks at the building while others smashed the doors and windows. Someone in the crowd dropped fireworks outside of the building. Unfortunately, those exploded in the crowd, which startled the back of the march, sending some people in the opposite direction.

A block ahead, the crowd passed another Atlanta police vehicle and set about breaking its windows. Someone tossed a firework inside it. A few minutes later, the burning vehicle poured smoke into the early evening skyline. Someone broke a window of Truist Bank. A half block ahead, a Wells Fargo lost many windows and both of the street-level ATMs were broken. Again, fireworks exploded near the crowd at street level, to no clear purpose. Anxiety was building in the march though it had encountered no obstacles up to that point.

Ahead, three police vehicles blocked Peachtree Street near the intersection with Baker Street. A few forest defenders began throwing fireworks and stones at the cars, which stopped them from advancing closer to the march. Nearly a half block separated the crowd from the cruisers, and there were no cops behind the march, which now numbered around 120 people. Rather than confront the officers, a confrontation the march probably could have won, the group faltered, pausing for a few crucial moments. Abruptly, a few Atlanta police



officers charged out of their cars toward the black bloc. Only a handful of protesters threw stones and fireworks; everyone else pulled back, though they did not scatter or stampede.

The officers managed to tackle a few young people near the front of the protest. Moving quickly, the black bloc dispersed into downtown. Shortly after, police tackled and arrested a few more people they suspected of participating in the event. Georgia State Patrolmen parked along Peachtree Center and Piedmont, donning gas masks and retrieving tear gas from their trunks, but the demonstration was over.

Everyone arrested that night was charged with Domestic Terrorism, bringing the total number of those accused under the statute to 18 people. One person is facing two counts, one from the December 13 attack on the forest, and one for being in the vicinity of the January 21 protest. At time of publication, 7 of those 18 have been denied bond for over a month. Several of the accused are not receiving proper medical care or food appropriate for their dietary needs.

All of the accused are being charged under House Bill 452, the Georgia Domestic Terrorism law. This law redefines Domestic Terrorism in Georgia following the horrific killing of Black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina in 2017. Under the previous law, such an act would not have constituted Domestic Terrorism, because only nine people were killed, and the old law required that ten people die before a Terrorism enhancement could be applied. Under HB 452, no such quota exists. The law is extremely wide-reaching; depending upon how it is interpreted, it could serve to criminalize a wide range of ordinary protest activities, because of a vaguely-worded clause about “critical infrastructure.”

The protesters arrested on January 21 are not being charged with Domestic Terrorism because they broke windows. If they had, that would already constitute a shocking and novel abuse of judicial authority. Rather, they are accused of being in a crowd in which some people broke windows and threw fireworks.

Atlanta area prosecutors aim to set the precedent that sending text messages, camping in the woods, posting on social media, and participating in an unruly protest are all forms of terrorism. This sets a precedent for outright totalitarianism.

## IS EVERYTHING COMING TO A HEAD?

Images of the police cruiser set aflame on January 21 spread virally online. Both corporate and grassroots reporting highlighted the precision of the vandalism: protesters broke windows only at the bank branches with direct connections to the APF, as well as some APD cruisers and the APF headquarters itself. Judging by the chatter across town and online, the public seemed to understand the targets and the rage of the forest defenders in the wake of the killing of Tortuguita, even if they did not approve of political vandalism in the abstract.

At the same time, the movement's popularity was exploding. Thousands of non-profit organizations and civic groups joined anarchists, autonomists, anti-capitalists, and revolutionaries around the world in signing a declaration of solidarity with the movement. Among those groups were 350.org, Rainforest Action Network, Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Sunrise Movement, No More Deaths, Black Alliance for Peace, National Lawyers Guild, and PEN America—the sort of groups that had previously stood aside from the struggle to defend the forest. Several more drafted their own statements of support for the movement, including the King Center. Many of these groups emphasized the list of secondary and tertiary targets connected to Cop City, calling on their members to pressure those companies to divest from the APF. Soon after the march downtown, three Democratic Party Congresspeople declared their support for the movement.

In less than a week, the movement had confronted an unspeakable tragedy and reoriented the narrative 180 degrees, outflanking the falsehoods of the police, politicians, and corporate media.

If the movement continues on its current trajectory toward mass mobilization and support, it will demonstrate the viability of its strategy, provided that the way that the movement developed in the first place is not erased (as occurred, for example, in the George Floyd rebellion). Specifically, it would show that a small, dedicated group of militant activists can precipitate a large-scale mobilization, not just chase after it. If the movement continues to grow, that will have been because of the dogged determination, flexibility, courage, creativity,

and intelligence of a couple hundred people who pushed the envelope continuously from the beginning.

## **BLOOD IN THE WATER**

On January 31, Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens and Dekalb County CEO Michael Thurmond held a joint press conference. After inviting all of the local press, the authorities changed their minds at the last minute, closing public access to the event and locking all but two corporate media outlets outside with protesters. They deployed 60 police cruisers around the perimeter of City Hall in order to contain the dozens who gathered to protest the press conference.

Together, the mayor and the CEO of Dekalb County announced a “compromise” between the two governments. The new agreement, which is not legally binding, emerges from a series of closed-door meetings with no public input or transparency. It introduces changes that nobody asked for: for example, supposedly, the new plans for Cop City no longer include an explosives testing site. Presumably, this change is intended to hurry the project through the permitting process. The new permits include an “elasticity clause,” allowing the APF to alter or expand the development once it is underway; this leaves them an opening to underhandedly fulfill their original plan. While the announcement does not represent a victory, it does suggest that a degree of institutional panic could be taking hold.

The Land Disturbance Permit was approved. Throughout an entire hour of lies and half-truths, Mayor Dickens did not mention the killing of Tortuguita a single time.

Meanwhile, Tortuguita’s family had commissioned a private autopsy, which revealed that they were shot at least 13 different times by various officers.

The following week, Mayor Dickens announced his intention to host a question-and-answer session at the Atlanta University Center (AUC). The AUC hosts Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta, and the Morehouse School of Medicine. These are the privately-owned historically Black colleges and universities that Atlanta is famous for.

The Mayor was determined to host this Q&A session with the Black

students on February 7, because a week earlier, on January 31, a group of students staged a public disruption of a campus event, during which they demanded that the school divest from the Atlanta Police Foundation and denounce Cop City. At the same time, 20% of Morehouse faculty signed an open letter to the campus administration, strongly denouncing the institution's involvement with the APF.

During the Q&A on February 7, some students and community members refused to enter the auditorium, chanting slogans and denouncing the event from outside. Inside the event, speaker after speaker criticized the Morehouse President, the Mayor of Atlanta, and the systems of white supremacy and capitalism that terrorize and kill the communities that the school is supposed to educate and uplift. The event was a disaster for the City Government's public relations strategy.

The following day, on February 8, the Atlanta Police Department released body camera footage of the January 18 raid. This footage was published unceremoniously, with no accompanying statement or press conference. After the GBI had claimed that no footage existed that was relevant to the case, many were shocked by what the video showed.

The body camera footage does not show the killing of Tortuguita by Georgia State Patrolmen. Rather, it shows a few officers walking through the woods when gunfire bursts erupt from nearby. No yelling or commands precede the shooting. One Atlanta police officer says "You fucked your own officer up?" In the footage, which shows many perspectives and moments from the morning, three separate groups of Atlanta police officers seem to be under the impression that the Patrolmen have accidentally shot one of their own. The video also records a single unexplained shot several minutes after the initial volley.

All this seems to undermine the official narrative. In releasing the footage, the Atlanta police were bowing to pressure brought to bear on them by Tortuguita's family and their lawyers, who had hosted a press conference two days prior. It is also conceivable that they hoped to distance themselves from the actions of the GBI.

In the following days, a massive number of police began stationing around Key Road and inside the North Gate of the Old Atlanta Prison Farm. They escorted Brent Scarborough Company, a Brasfield & Gorrie

subcontractor and a donor to the Governor and the APF, onto the property, where officers erected a barrier tarp and several large spotlights facing the forest. Inside the gate, workers began laying down gravel and clearing trees in order to erect silt fencing for erosion control. Police officers and unmarked vehicles are staging 24 hours per day at positions every few dozen feet along the perimeter of the Prison Farm. In a recent statement to the Dekalb County court, the APF claims it is spending \$41,500 per day to secure the site.

Resistance is spreading. During the final week of January, protests and vigils occurred in over 20 cities. On February 9, over 100 Georgia Tech students marched around campus denouncing Cop City and attempting to storm administration buildings. Since the beginning of February, rallies, marches, and benefit shows have taken place in Ann Arbor, Washington, DC, Binghamton, New Orleans, Flagstaff, Tucson, Vancouver, Humboldt, and elsewhere.

While Brasfield & Gorrie and their subcontractors continue to push ahead at the behest of the APF, forest defenders everywhere are organizing themselves into local committees and organizing groups to pressure contractors, spread awareness, raise funds, and send delegations to Atlanta for the Week of Action scheduled to begin on March 4.

It is possible that the movement is closer to victory than it seems. It is certainly at a crucial threshold—sure to be the most determinant of the entire struggle. It is up to courageous people to keep pushing for bolder and more creative strategies.

*This text was drafted by heartbroken people in crowded rooms, receiving phone calls and text messages day and night. We offer this humble contribution in the midst of grief and horror at the killing of Tortuguita. We hope to pass on memories and analysis from the fight that Tortuguita joined in April 2022.*

To support the arrestees, donate at: [atlsolidarity.org](https://atlsolidarity.org)



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# THE *FOREST* IN THE CITY

The campaign to defend the forest in Atlanta, Georgia has become one of the most vibrant movements of the post-Trump era, interweaving environmentalism, abolitionism, and the fight against gentrification. Yet as police shift to employing lethal violence and indiscriminate terrorism charges, it has reached a critical juncture. Participants explore how this struggle has developed over the past year, reflecting on the practices that have given it strength and analyzing the challenges before it.

At the time of publishing, more information about the movement can be found at [defendtheatlantaforest.com](http://defendtheatlantaforest.com) or on social media under the names “Defend the Atlanta Forest” and “Stop Cop City.”